Writing for Land

Namaakii Bee Bear Hat

Namaakii Bee Bear Hat (she/her) is a Mohkinstsis-based artist, whose Blackfoot and Cree/Dane-zaa ancestors have lived on the lands that are now part of Treaty 7 and 8 for many millennia.
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Oki, Tansai, Hello

Most of what I know about land can be seen within my art practice. I am a born and raised Mohkinstsis woman, here is part of my progressing land acknowledgment that will continue to grow as I do:

> I want to welcome all to this space and give this very tender area some much-deserved respect. This is the meeting place where the Elbow River and Bow River confluence, this is my maternal home territory that has been understood as Kootsisáw (Tsuut'ina), Mohkínstsis (Blackfoot), and Wincheesh-pah (Stoney Nakoda) for many millennia. Mohkinstsis is the landscape that raised me during my adolescence and is the place I have rooted myself in as an adult. My mother was born and raised in Siksika Nation, she resolved to root her adult life in Mohkinstsis to raise us girls by always thinking firstly for her family. Blueberry River First Nation is my paternal home territory and my family expands through Prophet River First Nation and Halfway River First Nation. My father is of Dane-zaa and Beaver Cree descent, his lineage is based on where the muskeg and trees meet. My family has lived and trapped alongside these rivers for many generations.
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> I will not acknowledge the treaties that have bordered off these lands into territories by the government of Canada, as all of these commitments have failed all Indigenous peoples with or without status across this country. There is so much unrecognized strength and sacrifice from the backs of my ancestors and I am slowly returning to practices that are unfolding the weight that goes into being a caregiver of land.

I share two histories that are both tied to land within the territories of Treaty 7 and 8. These agreements aren't upheld, which led to a complex upbringing but also a tangled generational lineage, led by the Canadian government seeking to abolish all living Indigenous bodies. They did not succeed in their endeavour, however they splintered wills and spirits and pulled out traditional cultural roots. How I have been able to heal and reconnect myself is through making art, by sharing parts of my upbringing through stories and photographs that are of our land. These photographs are documentation of our true, authentic selves on the land, moments in time that are usually spent away from society, obligations or demands to reconnect and re-invite ourselves back to our culture or tradition. Our guide is usually my father, and he shares our history of the trapline by supplying us with knowledge of where we can find our smudge, where to pick berries, where our the remnants of our great-grandparents' cabin still stand. My father always has a saying when he's been in town for too long: "I need to head back to the bush." The bush is home and it's where we can find ourselves and bring our spirit to regain much needed strength.

My career started when I graduated from the Alberta University for the Arts in Mohkinstsis, I finished with a painting degree that developed into a practice exploring collage and photography. I found that working through this documentation of my family spoke truer to finding my footing within my Indigenous culture. When looking back, there were many ways we show culture but one that always spoke to me was remembering through family photo albums. Elders or older family members sitting you down, showing you who's who and where they were in those moments is culture and, for my father's own collection, many of those sacred moments were captured while out on land. He eagerly documented us girls out there with him, he stopped time every chance he got so that we could all look back on our shared moments in the bush. This form of care manifests in different forms in my practice but the main one that assists my work the most is capturing us now, out on land, from my own perspective. I never want to be overly

vulnerable to either myself or my family members—in our culture, sacredness is monumental, there are parts of us that are just for us—I never want to forget that lesson. I approach landscape photography with similar tenderness for what I am sharing, therefore I have yet to share the full identity of any subjects that are within my frame. I do this by capturing moments that are natural but also making sure our bodies never face the lens straight on or in closeups. For me, it was enough to show how we spend time out on land without ever allowing the viewer to see past a certain distance or clarity—allowing the land to be our blanketed cover, as if it were another character protecting us.

A pattern I have developed since leaving university is combining imagery with handwritten text and collage. With collage, I take the form of materials or objects that appear mundane and place them in the forefront, granting the objects a chance to expand further into thought and memory. In this way, I show viewers how certain items have established roots within my life, devising trails for remembrance and nostalgia. For *Kokum*, a work that was exhibited in the group show *Related* (January 2022) at the Libbylesh Gold Gallery at Emily Carr University in Vancouver, BC, the entire installation was created from a single pair of deer antlers that had been handed down to me from my Kokum. She kept many findings from her walks out in the bush and what she hung on her fence around her house were dried out antlers she had gathered. One of these antlers was given to me after she had passed. From then on, they hung in every place I lived in around Mohkinstsis. After some time, I wanted to construct a body of work that stemmed from this quiet, beautiful gift, because bestowing such items was the natural way I could show my culture. I gathered objects that reminded me of her awareness of how to live out on the land and pieced these momentos together with images given to me by my aunties. These were accompanied by stories of our small and

fig. 1 Namaakii Bee Bear Hat, *Blackfoot*, 2011. Collage photo transfer over paper.

fig. 2 Pink Mountain photographed by Arthur Chipesia, family photo collection.

far-in-between reunions, written on the wall; looking back, I don't have a lot of interactions with my kokum, but that doesn't mean her way of life didn't leave forever marks. This body of work, which has changed with each showing, was for me to think of home through the memory of my kokum, the person that gave so much for her entire family.

Land will always be the root of art making for me—there are stories and histories that have long existed here and will continue to deepen long after us. My most recent exhibition, *Something Given*, curated by Adam Whitford and myself, was a collection of raw materials sourced from the Sikoohkotoki area. This installation expanded the entire upper gallery with plinths made of cottonwood collected from southern Alberta, holding ceramics made from natural clay pulled from the Old Man River and rocks gathered from Pavan Park. The ceramics were formed in the shapes of gifts that had been given to me: a pair of cowboy boots, a cast iron pan, an axe, and a cooler. The wealth of these gifts grew over time and the longer these pieces stayed with me, the more they grew in significance for how I understand care. By bringing this history of myself into a different part of my maternal homeland and prioritizing placement of where I stood, this body of work brought accountability. Adding to the stories and helping those around the area to remember land can hold us in many different ways.

fig. 3 Namaakii Bee Bear Hat, *Aitskaitsiiwa _ She Is Reminiscing*, 2018. Digital image.

figs. 4 (left) and 5 (right) Research photos, private collection, 2011 (left) and 2023 (right).

fig. 6 Namaakii Bee Bear Hat, *Us together*, 2011. Digital image.

fig. 7 Namaakii Bee Bear Hat, *Blackfoot*, installed at Stride Gallery, Mohkinstsis, AB, 2023.

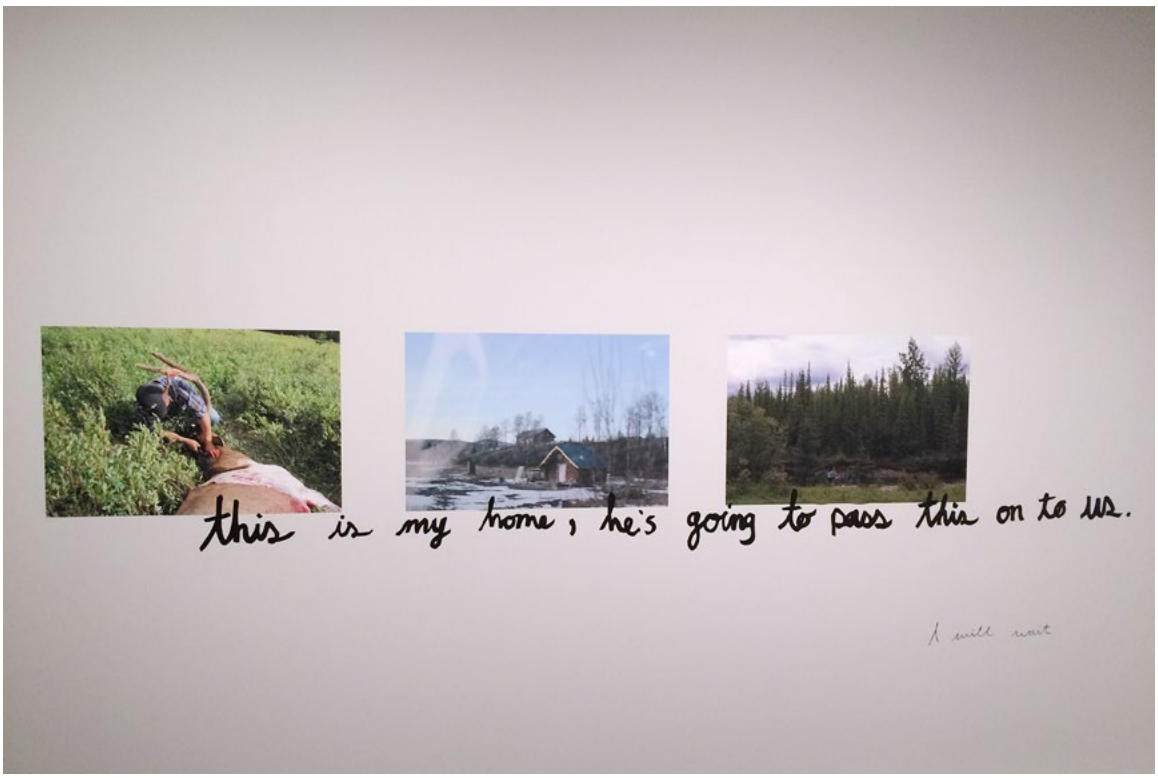

fig. 8 Namaakii Bee Bear Hat, *Home*, installation at Future Station, Alberta Biennale, Edmonton, AB, 2015.

fig. 9 Namaakii Bee Bear Hat, *Kokum*, installation at Libbylesh Gold Gallery, Vancouver, BC, 2022.

fig. 10 Namaakii Bee Bear Hat, *Something Given*, installation at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Sikoohkotoki, 2025.

fig. 11 Namaakii Bee Bear Hat, *Us in Sikoohkotoki*, 2025. Digital image made for exhibition at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery.